

Byzantine Hagiography and Sex in the Fifth to Twelfth Centuries

ALEXANDER KAZHDAN

Hagiography and sexuality—can two notions be more contrasted, more incompatible? Hagiographical works present the entire life or an episode in the life of a holy man or woman or a group of men and women, or posthumous miracles at their tombs or shrines, in order to provide the reader with a moral paragon and instruction on how to devote one's whole life to God. Hagiographical works present, usually in a sequence of episodes, the system of Christian values, among which chastity naturally holds a place of honor. The gist of the hagiographical message is that the body and its "impure" desires should be suppressed and the sexual drive eliminated. The hero has to forget, in his or her claim to holiness, what sex he or she was given. A hermit in the desert is deprived, for a casual observer, of any marks of his sex, and a woman in disguise enters a male monastery and bravely exercises her piety among the representatives of another sex.¹ Angels had no sex; in visionary dreams they resemble eunuchs. And the monastic community, an ideal of hagiography, was an angelic, that is, epicene society.²

But in the paradoxical, ambivalent world of Byzantium the most edifying genre of literature was, at the same time, the most entertaining one. Meant to indoctrinate and assuming a substantial part in church reading, hagiographical writings were the

mass media (*Trivialliteratur*) of the time.³ They were crammed with *sujets* that attracted the average listener: travels and shipwrecks, natural disasters, fantastic beasts, incredible healings, murders and thefts, and the topic of sex was certainly not lacking. The Byzantines, admirers of epicene angels and saints, were far from being epicene themselves; the average listener of hagiographical works wanted sexy stories, and he got them in quite significant numbers.

THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN HAGIOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

In her article referred to above (note 2). C. Galatariotou emphasized the "patriarchy" and "misogyny" of Byzantine society, even though she herself runs into a difficulty—the image of the Virgin Mary. She based her conclusions on Neophytos the Enkleistes. On the contrary, hagiography benevolently accepted the role of women. God created both Adam and Eve, and later appeared in the world via the female, says the hagiographer of St. Martinianos.⁴ The biographer of St. Andrew the Fool agreed with him: it was not the Devil who created woman but God himself; he created woman in order to augment the world, and every man who wants to have a wife can have her with God's permission.⁵ There is no distinction between the male and female in the eyes of God, says another hagiographer,⁶ and the female sex is to be praised beginning with the Mother of God.⁷ Hagiographers assume that the female gender is weaker and

In order to avoid excessively long footnotes I will refer to *BHG*, its *Auctarium* of 1969 and *Novum Auctarium* of 1984. When *BHG* indicates several editions, I will refer (in an abbreviated form) to the one that I used; only if I used a more recent edition not included in *BHG* and its *auctaria*, will I give the complete reference.

¹E. Patlagean, *Structure sociale, famille, chrétienté à Byzance* (London, 1981), XI, 597–623.

²As C. S. Galatariotou ("Holy Women and Witches," *BMGS* 9 [1984–85], 85) puts it: "Saintly women require not only a denial of sexuality . . . but a denial of their very sex."

³Cf. H. Kech, *Hagiographie als christliche Unterhaltungsliteratur* (Göppingen, 1977).

⁴*BHG* 1177, ed. P. Rabbow, p. 291.23–24.

⁵*Vita* of Andrew the Fool, *BHG* 117, col. 765AB.

⁶Translation of Theodora of Thessalonike, *BHG* 1739, p. 42.3–4.

⁷*Vita* of Thomais of Lesbos, *BHG* 2454, p. 234B.

gentler,⁸ but women are able to reject their weakness and act as men.⁹ To be like a man is singular praise for a woman:¹⁰ when the Arab fleet approached Attaleia, the governor of the city commanded the entire population to mount the city walls, and not only were there men holding shields but young women disguised as men.¹¹ Women could demonstrate more heroism than men: in the words of deacon Ignatios, the author of Patriarch Tarasios' biography, during Iconoclasm feminine weakness turned out to be more steadfast than masculine strength.¹²

From this equality in origin, sanctity, and salvation one has to distinguish the inequality of everyday life: hagiographers knew that seclusion was the normal status of women, and only an extraordinary emergency would cause the prudent woman to forget her modesty (αἰδώς) and rush into the street.¹³ It was sometimes dangerous for a woman to appear in public, as is demonstrated by the story of a girl whom a local commander wanted to drag to slavery "only because of the beauty of her body" and who ran for protection to a church.¹⁴ The father of St. Theophano never allowed his daughter to leave the house without chaperons, and she was even sent to the bathhouse either in the evening or in the morning when the streets were empty, and was accompanied by servants and maids.¹⁵

MARRIAGE AND ITS PROBLEMS

On the scale of Byzantine ethical values, virginity occupied the topmost place, much higher than legitimate marriage; it is, however, to be noted that virginity was considered a type of marriage, the virgin (or nun) being proclaimed Christ's bride. It goes without saying that hagiographers praised celibacy; more interesting is their positive attitude toward marriage. A legitimate marriage, concluded with the approval of parents, was desirable.¹⁶ Empress Theodora is said to have respected virginity, but she held marriage in honor—"O

praiseful marriage," exclaims her biographer.¹⁷ Marriage had a twofold purpose: procreation (see above, note 5), and restriction of the sexual drive and avoidance of promiscuous fornication (see below, notes 23, 59).

The conflict between chastity and connubial life is a frequent topic of hagiography. Its simplest solution is an escape from the world to a monastery or nunnery, an action that could lead to a clash with the will of one's parents, as is described, for instance, in the *Vita* of Nikon Metanoite.¹⁸

In some cases pious girls managed to escape marriage. The hagiographer of three brothers—David, Symeon, and George of Lesbos—relates a novelette about a rich woman of senatorial rank who had two virtuous daughters, one of whom studied poetry and grammar, read the works of the church fathers, and longed for the monastic life, whereas the mother wanted her to enter a legitimate marriage. The daughter would probably have had to yield, but a sudden vision helped her: she saw a man in glimmering garment and lost her voice in fear. When St. Symeon of Lesbos healed her, the whole family, together with their maids, took the habit and founded a nunnery.¹⁹

Other children obeyed the will of their parents, as did Martha, the mother of St. Symeon the Stylite.²⁰ The ancient version of Symeon's *Vita* plainly states this fact, whereas the later short *Vita* dwells longer on it: Martha, says the compiler, did not want, in the beginning, to discard virginity, the treasure favored by God, even though she was often told how honorable marriage and the undefined marriage bed is.²¹

Hagiography presented a way of compromise between filial obedience and pious chastity—the non-consummated marriage. It is well known that young Theophanes the Confessor persuaded his bride to leave the world immediately after the wedding, and the same effect was achieved by St. Konon of Isauria.²² When St. Demetrianos turned fifteen, his parents decided to marry him off; their purpose was to secure the salvation of his soul, since, comments the hagiographer, legitimate mar-

⁸ *Vita* of Theodora of Thessalonike, *BHG* 1737, p. 20.1–2.

⁹ *Vita* of George of Amastris, *BHG* 668, p. 36.9–10.

¹⁰ Palladios, *Dialogue*, *BHG* 870, ed. P. R. Coleman-Norton, p. 98.30–31.

¹¹ *Vita* of Antony the Younger, *BHG* 142, p. 199.1–4.

¹² *BHG* 1698, p. 415.28–29.

¹³ *Vita* of Tarasios, *BHG* 1698, p. 421.34–35; *Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorion*, version B, *BHG* 1212, p. 13.18.

¹⁴ *Vita* of Peter of Argos, *BHG* 1504, ed. Ch. Papaoikonomou, p. 68.22–24.

¹⁵ *BHG* 1794, p. 3.25–30.

¹⁶ *Vita* of Andrew the Fool, *BHG* 117, col. 765C.

¹⁷ *BHG* 1731, ed. A. Markopoulos, *Symmeikta* 5 (1983), 271, par. 99–101.

¹⁸ On this problem, see A. Kazhdan, "Hagiographical Notes," *Byzantion* 54 (1984), 188–92.

¹⁹ *BHG* 494, pp. 234–36.

²⁰ *BHG* 1689, ed. P. van den Ven, p. 3.21.

²¹ *BHG* 1691, ed. J. Bompair, p. 79.16–18.

²² *Vitae* of Theophanes: *BHG* 1787z, ed. V. Latyšev, pp. 9f; *BHG* 1789, ed. C. de Boor, pp. 6 f; *BHG* 1792b, p. 20.30–37. *Vita* of Konon, *BHG* 2077, p. 301.1–7.

riage is in this respect second only to virginity.²³ Even though Demetrianos did not follow the example of Theophanes and Konon, his marriage was not consummated, and when, in three months, his very young wife died, she was still a virgin.

A conflict between marriage and chastity could evolve in the process of connubial life, as happened with Melania the Younger. After the death of her two sons she felt an aversion to marriage (μῖσος τοῦ γάμου) and told her husband that she would stay with him “as her lord and master” only if he agreed to lead a life of chastity; if not, she would give him all her belongings and “liberate her body.”²⁴ In the later *Vita* of Melania, the sharpness of this anti-marital tendency was reduced, the “aversion” disappeared, and only the call for chastity (ἀγνεύειν) remained.²⁵

The revision of two *vitae*, that of Symeon the Stylite and that of Melania, shows a change of attitude: the praise of marriage as “honorable” was introduced and, in addition, the aversion to marriage was muted. We can make a more general observation: the concept was developed that sanctity could be achieved not only in the desert or in the monastery but in family life. Maria the Younger and Thomais of Lesbos (see below) were married women who deserved the reward of holiness; Nicholas Kataskepenos, in the *Vita* of Cyril Philotes, conjured up the image of a saint who, after the birth of his child, limited his sexual intercourse with his wife but did not accept consistent celibacy, and Kataskepenos’ younger contemporary, Eustathios of Thessalonike, in an extraordinary *Vita* of Philotheos of Opsikion not only praised the married holy man but proclaimed the saint living in the world more honorable than lonely anchorites dwelling far from mundane temptations.²⁶

Normally marriage was a union contracted within family circles, parents playing a role more substantial than the spouses-to-be. The state, however, could interfere with this extremely private relationship of its subjects. The *Vita* of Athanasia of Aegina refers to an imperial *prostagma* that commanded all single women and widows to marry the *ethnikoi*.²⁷

The wedding feast is frequently recalled in hagiographical writings. St. Demetrianos’ parents celebrated his γαμήλιος ἑορτή.²⁸ Moreover, the wedding appears in a metaphorical context as a symbol of joy. Thus John of Damascus, after his amputated arm was miraculously restored, was so happy that one could think, says his hagiographer, he were celebrating *gamelia*, filling the chamber with the noise of marriage.²⁹ When the Iconoclast emperor Theophilos summoned Michael Synkellos, the saint came forth fearlessly not as a man entering the lists but as if he were called to his own marriage festivities.³⁰ A monk is said to have had a vision: a crowd of men in white garments on white horses and a woman in purple among them; their procession was accompanied with music and clapping, as it is, adds the writer, at marriage ceremonies.³¹

Unlike the Byzantine romance, hagiography does not stop at the wedding; the authors of saints’ *vitae* knew that marital problems began to arise after the festivities. These problems could be medical (primarily the barrenness of a marital couple) or moral (the incompatibility of spouses). Hagiographers gladly deal with barrenness. A frequent element of the saint’s story is the protracted barrenness of the hero’s parents that must be overcome by constant prayer or divine intervention. When Theophano’s parents had no child for a long time, they started visiting a church day and night and besought the Virgin to give them an heir and participant in their life.³² The Virgin was an appropriate protector of childbirth, but a male saint could also be helpful: the tomb of Patriarch Ignatios healed the barren spouse of a nobleman so that she brought forth several children.³³

When the hagiographer of St. Blasios broaches the topic of sterility, he uses a very risky, almost impudent formulation: a high-ranking Roman was said to have a legitimate wife but no children; he addressed Blasios, begging the saint to give him a child “to continue the family line and to inherit the property.”³⁴ The Greek ἀνάστασις σπέρματος, which I translate periphrastically as “continuation of the family line,” has the connotation “raising up

²³ *BHG* 495, ed. H. Grégoire, p. 222.163–67, corrections by E. Kurtz, *AB* 27 (1908), 31.

²⁴ *Historia Lausiaca*, II, ed. C. Butler (Hildesheim, 1967), p. 155.8–16.

²⁵ *BHG* 1241, ed. H. Delehay, *AB* 22 (1903), p. 11.13–15.

²⁶ On this evolution, see A. Kazhdan, “Hermitic, Cenobitic, and Secular Ideals in Byzantine Hagiography of the Ninth [to Twelfth] Centuries,” *GOTR* 30 (1985), 484–87.

²⁷ *BHG* 180, ed. F. Halkin, *Six inédits d’hagiologie byzantine* (Brussels, 1987), p. 181.7–9.

²⁸ *BHG* 495, ed. H. Grégoire, p. 222.171.

²⁹ *BHG* 884; PG 94, 460AB. Cf. *Vita* of Kosmas of Maiouma, *BHG* 395, p. 326.9–11.

³⁰ *BHG* 1296, p. 242.4–5.

³¹ *Vita* of Elias Speleotes, *BHG* 581, col. 880E.

³² *BHG* 1794, p. 2.16–18.

³³ *BHG* 817; PG 105, 561D.

³⁴ *BHG* 278, col. 665B.

the sperm," physiologically well connected with the situation of our Roman aristocrat.

A barren couple could expect some help from medical doctors, but this help was expensive. St. Antony the Younger had an adventurous life and once pretended to be a physician; a rich landowner (οἰκοδεσπότης) complained to Antony that after twenty-five years of marriage he had no child and promised the "doctor" a third of his property if he helped, but Antony demanded ten war horses as his honorarium.³⁵

Byzantine society could look with incredulity and suspicion at cases of miraculous assistance that healed protracted sterility. Thus John Moschos relates the story of the hermit Daniel who blessed a barren woman and she became pregnant; thereafter the rumor spread that the father was sterile and the baby was sired by Daniel. Then the hermit worked the second miracle: when the woman gave birth to the baby, Daniel asked the father to invite guests to a banquet, and during the festivities Daniel took the baby (then twenty-two days old) and asked him who his father was. "This man," answered the baby, pointing his finger in the direction of the husband.³⁶

Barrenness was a physical problem to be solved by medical or supra-medical intervention. Another serious problem of marital life was the incompatibility of spouses. The story of Mary the Younger is well known:³⁷ a faithful wife, she was accused by her cruel husband of having a love affair; in a fit of rage he beat her, and soon thereafter she died. Another case of conjugal tragedy is the *Vita* of Thomais of Lesbos. As did many hagiographical heroines, Thomais preferred virginity and shunned physical pleasures. However, she obeyed her parents, "bent her head to accept the wreath," and joined her legitimate spouse. But her husband, Stephen, turned out to be not her ally but an adversary; a man of the world, he behaved like a beast and beat her because she cared for the needy.³⁸ Another unhappy marriage is described in the *Vita* of Peter of Argos: the Devil excited in the wife such a hatred toward her husband that as soon as she heard him entering the house she would fall down on the floor and quiver;³⁹ only St. Peter's intervention cured the poor woman.

Whatever the hardships of marriage, it was a

holy institution, and spouses were obliged to preserve their bonds. Theodore of Stoudios was an eager supporter of the concept of the purity of marriage. One of his biographers conveys that Theodore insisted that a man could be the master of one woman only, as well as a woman the companion of only one man, and this union had to be legitimate and not illegal or licentious.⁴⁰ Theodore worried that Constantine VI's example (separation from his first wife) could make divorce a rule.⁴¹ In their anti-Muslim polemics, hagiographers criticized Islam for allowing four legitimate wives and thousands of concubines (παλλακαί), which indicated to them that Muslims worshiped God as protector of fornicators and even of sodomites.⁴² The author of the *Vita* of St. Andrew the Fool condemns a certain Rafael (the more as he was a deacon) who walked out on his wife and began living with a maidservant.⁴³

More complicated was the case of an illegitimate union, especially that of two slaves, which in the tenth century was not yet considered a marriage. The *Vita* of St. Basil the Younger described a "family" of house slaves.⁴⁴ Following the order of her master, Theodora joined her σύντροφος ("companion," not husband) and bore him two children; after his death she lived in chastity rearing her boy and girl; her master gave her a tiny little room in the vestibule of his house.⁴⁵ She had not been chaste in her youth, and when she died demons accused her of fornication. The angels, however, retorted that the slave maid was not blessed by a priest and had not received a legitimate benediction, nor was she given to a husband in church and adorned with a wreath—her pseudo-marriage was based only on the word and gesture of her master, and therefore she cannot be blamed for fornication.⁴⁶

BEAUTY AND NAKEDNESS

P. Brown emphasized that Christian writers rejected the ancient reverence toward "the fiery spirit unleashed in the sexual act."⁴⁷ In the gradation of sins, the illegal sexual act, πορνεία, was

⁴⁰ BHG 1754; PG 99, 257C. The passage is lacking in BHG 1755; PG 99, 144 C.

⁴¹ BHG 1755, col. 137BC.

⁴² *The Acts of Sixty-Three Martyrs*, BHG 1218, p. 147.15–22.

⁴³ BHG 117, cols. 797C, 800A.

⁴⁴ See Chr. Angelide, Δούλοι στην Κωνσταντινούπολη τὸν 10^ο αἰ., *Symmeikta* 6 (1985), 40 f.

⁴⁵ BHG 264b, pp. 300.39–301.6.

⁴⁶ BHG 263, ed. A. Veselovskij, I, p. 32.8–18.

⁴⁷ P. Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York, 1988), 432.

³⁵ BHG 142, pp. 195 f.

³⁶ John Moschos, PG 87, 2977D–2980A.

³⁷ BHG 1164, cols. 695 f.

³⁸ BHG 2454, cols. 235F–236F.

³⁹ BHG 1504, ed. Ch. Papaoikonomou, p. 69.11–15.

given a particular place: all other sins are those of the soul, but *porneia* is bodily wrongdoing. "Every vice terribly darkens the soul, but *porneia* makes the body filthy and disgraceful."⁴⁸ The body was considered sexually dangerous, especially if it was beautiful and naked.

Human beauty was ambivalent; it could reflect the beauty of the soul and, on the contrary, it could deceptively cover the spiritual ugliness of a man. Hagiographers frequently stress the beauty of their heroes and heroines. The pious girl Hypatia-Fevronia, in the *Vita* of the three brothers from Lesbos, shone in her spiritual and physical splendor.⁴⁹ The daughters and granddaughters of St. Philaretos the Merciful excelled all other women in their beauty.⁵⁰ Thomais of Lesbos also was exceedingly beautiful, so that her inner virtues flashed through her external appearance.⁵¹ But beauty in hagiography is a relative value and can appear in a suspicious context. St. Nilus of Rossano was handsome and had a beautiful voice, so that many single women (of course, excited by the Devil) chased him; one of these women surpassed all the others in both looseness and beauty, and she managed to seduce him and give birth to a girl.⁵² The union was probably illegitimate, since immediately after this notice, the hagiographer exclaims that Providence did not leave Nilus to wallow in this mire of a life.

"Good" hagiographical beauty is abstract and removed from the body as far as possible; since the body is shameful, it should remain covered. Heliodore, the Faust-like anti-hero of the *Vita* of Leo of Catania, made several women accompany him; they followed him across "deep waters" and naturally drew up their shirts (*χιτωνίσκοι*), so that not only their knees were bared but their thighs as well. The poor women were humiliated and laughed at.⁵³ Even more shameful was the behavior of an indecent woman who remained naked in the water while her companions, mortified at seeing St. Dometios, tried to cover themselves.⁵⁴

A story told by Moschos shows the shocking fear that a Christian could experience before a female body: a Persian girl asked the priest Konon to baptize her; she was so beautiful that the priest "was

unable to anoint her with the holy oil." She stayed two days in the Lavra of St. Sabas waiting in vain, and then Archbishop Peter (524–552) suggested sending a deaconess to celebrate the rite, but it was found improper. Confounded by his weakness, Konon fled to the hills. There John the Baptist appeared to him and enjoined him to return. "Having removed Konon's clothes, John sealed thrice with the sign of the cross the part of Konon's body down from the navel" and thus quelled his sexual passion, so that the next day Konon quietly baptized the girl "not even noticing that she was female by nature."⁵⁵

Sanctity helped a man overcome temptation caused by the naked body. When Luke the Younger sent the monk Pankratios to a sick woman he ordered Pankratios to take a small vessel of oil and rub it with his own hands on the patient's body. Both the woman and her husband were stunned by this inappropriate behavior but eventually obeyed, and Pankratios rubbed her entire body from head to toe, following the instructions he had received from Luke.⁵⁶

ILLICIT INTERCOURSE

In Byzantine society, which venerated marriage and was frightened by the sight of the naked body, adultery and lewdness occupied a surprisingly important place. Nowadays, complains the hagiographer of Andrew the Fool, the people play like blind and insensible beasts; many fornicate with rejoicing and commit adultery by giving gifts and presents.⁵⁷ The secular administration took severe measures to fight this evil. If we may believe the *Vita* of Antony the Younger, a governor issued a decree ordering every fornicator and every prostitute to be arrested, their property confiscated, and their hair cut off to make them a laughing stock.⁵⁸

Libertines were found in all walks of life. We hear about a poor young man who could not afford legitimate marriage and therefore was defiled by improper and illicit intercourse.⁵⁹ A married man had two eunuchs who provided him with diverse women—single and married alike, as well as whores; his habit was to get up before the roosters and to head to church, but on his way to church he would stop "to accomplish the deed of the Devil."

⁴⁸ *BHG* 117, col. 828B, D.

⁴⁹ *BHG* 494, p. 234.13–14.

⁵⁰ *BHG* 1511z, p. 141.2–5; *BHG* 1522, p. 76.17–18.

⁵¹ *BHG* 2454, cols. 234B, 235E.

⁵² *BHG* 1370, ed. *ActaSS* Sept. VII, col. 263B.

⁵³ *BHG* 981b, p. 17.30–33.

⁵⁴ *BHG* 560, p. 308.33–34.

⁵⁵ PG 87, 2853D–2856B.

⁵⁶ *BHG* 994, ed. E. Martini, p. 107.4–13.

⁵⁷ *BHG* 117, cols. 765D, 800A.

⁵⁸ *BHG* 142, p. 194.16–19.

⁵⁹ *Miracles of St. Menas*, *BHG* 1254m, p. 148.27–31.

And thus his piety was praised by everybody but in fact he was “a clandestine devil.”⁶⁰ Another man “of the new generation” was extremely licentious (the hagiographer uses the word *πορνικάπηλος*, which is not found in either Lampe or Liddell-Scott), inclined to incest and lust, even to sodomy, never visiting a church, wasting his time with strumpets, drunkards, and musicians.⁶¹ Women could be lewd as well: St. Thomais healed two of this type, and grateful for her medical help, one promised to enter legitimate marriage, whereas the other’s vow was more restricted—she swore to stop disorderly intercourse with men during the divine and great feasts.⁶²

Even some monks were not free from the sin of fornication. Moschos tells a story of a monk of the monastery of St. Theodosios who left for Jerusalem and went first of all to a brothel; he then worked as a craftsman and led a profligate life, squandering his salary and that of his companion.⁶³ Another monk, while visiting his village, succumbed to erotic desire and at night went to bed with a local woman; his act did not remain unknown—miraculously Stephen the Sabaites found out when and where the man had sinned.⁶⁴ In Capua, due to the omniscience of Nilus of Rossano, the mother superior of a convent was caught in bed with a priest.⁶⁵ Even decent and saintly people could be falsely denounced as fornicators. A former disciple of Stephen the Younger accused the holy man of insulting Constantine V and of sexual relations with Stephen’s spiritual daughter, the nun Anna. Anna was arrested but naturally did not acknowledge her adultery (the hagiographer knows that there was no crime perpetrated), but nevertheless the cruel Constantine ordered her to be flogged.⁶⁶

In this atmosphere of pervasive lewdness, the harlot’s was a necessary and popular profession, and accordingly brothels frequently appear on the pages of hagiographical works. The hagiographer of Andrew the Fool describes a merry company in Constantinople that, after a carousal, headed to “μυῖα of crude women,” defiling there the beauty of their souls until the small hours; as they

left they were arrested and whipped.⁶⁷ The word *mimarion* is explained below as “brothel.” We also meet in this *Vita* the term “the inn of actresses (μυμάδων)” having the same meaning.⁶⁸ Moschos relates a story of a hermit who could not resist the sexual drive, went to Jericho, visited a brothel, and was infected with leprosy.⁶⁹

Prostitutes were impudent in their dress and especially in their gestures. Gregory of Dekapolis saw in Syracuse a tower built near the harbor; a licentious woman lived in this tower, and the sailors who arrived safe from the perilous sea would be allured by her fake beauty and impudent gestures.⁷⁰ Gregory succeeded in changing her habits, and transformed the brothel into a pious dwelling. The hagiographer of Andrew the Fool also describes a *mimas* who noticed two young men sitting in a public place and right away began to make impure gestures trying to arouse desire in them.⁷¹

Although prostitution was a sinful and disreputable profession, some saints nevertheless had harlots as their mothers. Thus Maria, Theodore of Sykeon’s mother, earned her living as a prostitute in a country inn,⁷² and a later legend made St. Helena, Constantine the Great’s mother, a harlot in an inn, although some historians of the ninth and tenth centuries, shocked by this legend, rejected the story of her improper past.⁷³

Repentant harlots, however, could achieve respected sanctity. St. Maria of Egypt and St. Pelagia are famous examples of transformed prostitutes. Tenth-century morality, which would not put up with the prostitution of St. Helena, tried to reformulate the past of St. Maria—at any rate, in the tenth-century *Vita* of Theoktiste of Lesbos, which was modeled on the basis of the Egyptian saint’s life, the heroine was not a strumpet but a pious nun.⁷⁴ Other hagiographical prostitutes are less well known than Pelagia and Maria, but they were

⁶⁰ *Vita* of Andrew the Fool, *BHG* 117, col. 852B.

⁶¹ *BHG* 117, col. 833BC.

⁶² *BHG* 2454, col. 238DF.

⁶³ PG 87, 2956BD.

⁶⁴ *BHG* 1670, col. 538C.

⁶⁵ *BHG* 1370, ed. *ActaSS* Sept. VII, col. 307BC. Gregory, the hagiographer of Lazarus Galesiotes (*BHG* 979, col. 555AC), also tells a story about a priest’s wife who tried to seduce a monk.

⁶⁶ *BHG* 1666; PG 100, 1125BD, 1132BC.

⁶⁷ *Vita* of Andrew the Fool, *BHG* 117, col. 649AB.

⁶⁸ *BHG* 117, col. 776D.

⁶⁹ PG 87, 2861C.

⁷⁰ *BHG* 711, ed. F. Dvornik, pp. 56.23–57.2.

⁷¹ *BHG* 117, col. 764D. The *Vita* of Andrew the Fool is probably exceptionally severe toward “fornicators”; see J. Grosdidier de Matons, “Les thèmes d’édification dans la Vie d’André Salos,” *TM* 4 (1970), 324.

⁷² *BHG* 1748, ed. A. Festugière, I, p. 3.8–14.

⁷³ A. Kazhdan, “‘Constantine imaginaire,’” *Byzantion* 57 (1987), 212–15. For some examples of harlots in hagiographical works of the late Roman period, see H. J. Magoulas, “Bathhouse, Inn, Tavern, Prostitution, and the Stage as Seen in the Lives of the Saints of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries,” *Επ. Έτ. Βυζ. Σπ.* 38 (1971), 240–46.

⁷⁴ A. Kazhdan, “Hagiographical Notes,” *BZ* 78 (1985), 49 f.

also destined for salvation. Thus, in a fragment from the *Pratum spirituale*, we read of a nun who left her convent in Thessalonike, devoted herself to fornication, but eventually repenting returned to the entrance of her convent to die.⁷⁵

A single good action by a fornicator or prostitute could be sufficient to secure his or her salvation. Moschos tells a tale about an orphan girl who gave away her whole inheritance to save a man overburdened with debts; then, having no means to exist, she became a harlot, but soon “came to her senses” and abandoned this profession. When she decided to convert to Christianity, the pious members of the parish, in their indignation, refused to accept a whore, but their earthly morality was overruled by heaven, and angels brought her to a church and ordered her to be baptized.⁷⁶

A similar story is found in the *Vita* of St. Theodoulos of Edessa.⁷⁷ The saint heard a prophetic voice announcing that a certain Cornelius would inherit the kingdom of heaven. Theodoulos was astonished since Cornelius was a flutist in Damascus, a representative of a despicable profession, according to traditional Christian standards. Nevertheless, Theodoulos started the search for Cornelius and found him in a hippodrome holding his musical instrument in one hand and with the other caressing a bare-headed harlot who wore inappropriate and impious decorations. Cornelius confessed to Theodoulos that he spent each day with whores and actors—but he was granted the heavenly kingdom because once he had acted with sympathy and generosity.

As a matter of fact, Cornelius’ story as related to Theodoulos is the centerpiece of the whole *Vita*. Cornelius, returning home from a nightly church service, noticed an incredibly beautiful woman; he addressed her with flattering words (treating her as a prostitute) and tried to hug her, but she began crying and was unwilling to accept his caresses. Surprised, Cornelius asked her to explain her strange behavior, and she told him her story. She was a daughter of honest parents, an orphan from the age of twelve; when she married, she brought her husband a significant dowry. He squandered everything and, moreover, went into debt and now was afraid of being arrested and thrown into prison. So the woman decided to become a street-walker to earn her husband’s ransom. Touched by

her self-sacrifice, Cornelius gave her 230 nomismata and other coins and things and, without asking her name, sent her away.

The anchorite Kaioumas had to tackle an analogous case. He was summoned as arbiter by a council in Cyprus that discussed the fate of the late Philentolos, the son of Olympios. Philentolos was a generous rich man who helped the poor and even founded a hospital but had “a passion for fornication.” Kaioumas explained that Philentolos was to be saved from Hell because of his charitable deeds, even though—and Kaioumas is less tolerant to the licentious sinner than the author of the *Vita* of Theodoulos—he was not admitted to Paradise; his soul had to remain with those of unbaptized children.⁷⁸

Both Cornelius and Philentolos, fornicators as they were, were rewarded for their good deeds, primarily generosity; Pelagia and Maria repented and became zealous anchorites. The *Vita* of Theodore of Edessa, however, reveals that a prostitute could acquire holiness automatically, without any effort on her part. A woman, relates the hagiographer, had a son who was gravely ill, so she asked everyone to pray for his health; all was in vain until she met a whore, hurled the boy into the harlot’s lap and, genuflecting, besought her to pray. The sinner was ashamed by this unexpected demand, but seeing the boy at the verge of death turned to the East and, beating her breast with her hands, prayed in tears. An extraordinarily brilliant light descended from heaven upon the boy and the prostitute, the prayer was accepted, and the boy recovered.⁷⁹ The licentious sinner could be pure in the eyes of God.

UNREQUITED LOVE

A particular *sujet* of the hagiographical erotic story is the conflict in which one person is inclined to or even longing for intercourse and another resists it. The Acts of the apostle Andrew deals with such a conflict developing within a family, long after the wedding. Maximilla, wife of Aegeatus, *anthypatos* of Achaea, walked “on Christ’s road” and decided to cease sleeping with her husband; she used her illness as an excuse. Aegeatus insisted, threatening otherwise to execute Andrew,

⁷⁵Ed. Th. Nissen, “Unbekannte Erzählungen aus dem *Pratum spirituale*,” *BZ* 38 (1938), p. 357.11–18.

⁷⁶PG 87, 3097C–3100B.

⁷⁷BHG 1785, cols. 752F–754F.

⁷⁸F. Halkin, “La vision de Kaioumos et le sort éternel de Philentolos Olympiou,” *AB* 63 (1945), 62–64. See C. P. Kyrris, “The Admission of the Souls of Immoral but Humane People into the ‘limbus puerorum,’ according to the Cypriot Abbot Kaioumos,” *RESEE* 9 (1971), 461–77.

⁷⁹BHG 1744, pp. 58 f.

who encouraged Maximilla to remain chaste even though she might die in the name of Christ. No threat, however, could break Maximilla's steadfastness. The hagiographer describes Aegeatus' despair; the man could not understand his wife's behavior and kept calling her back: "Why do you disregard your parents who entrusted you to me in marriage, and why do you avoid the [sexual] union? Your parents appreciated in me not my wealth, glory, or origin but my honesty and gentleness."⁸⁰ This appeal to parents is typical of the Byzantine concept of marriage: it was negotiated by parents, but it required an individual will to disrupt the union and accept chastity.

More often hagiographers present the conflict of "unrequited love" in an extramarital situation or in the case when only one part is bound by marital ties. The object of desire can be either male or female; if the object is male, the situation is frequently compared with that of the biblical legend of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and the man is called "a new Joseph." Thus the "edifying story" of Philotheos evokes the biblical episode, opposing "the just Joseph" and "the impious Egyptian lady," adulterous wife of the *patrikios* Constantine, who tried to seduce the young slave and after her failure accused him of encroaching upon her honor.⁸¹

The *Vita* of Theodore of Edessa contains a lengthy tale about a handsome young monk, Michael from Mar-Saba, who would come to Jerusalem to sell baskets. A eunuch of the "queen Seida," the spouse of Abd el-Malik, liked his baskets, and once he brought Michael to the abode of "the new Egyptian lady." Seida let Michael in; she started with generous promises of freedom and wealth, but Michael responded that he had already received everything from Christ. Seida took the next step and asked Michael to become her friend; by *φίλος* she meant "lover." Michael retorted that he loved Christ and that his friends are heavenly powers and saints; describing his attitude toward them, Michael employed vocabulary appropriate to erotic relations—sweetness, desire, passion, beauty, comeliness. Then Seida changed her tactics and threatened Michael, but he was not afraid. In despair she exclaimed: "You, poor man, deprive yourself of great benefits—am I not beautiful, desirable, worthy of passionate longing?" Michael did not accept her boastful assertions; for him she

was not beautiful and desirable but ugly, filthy, and hateful. He could not find a better way to offend the beautiful queen, and Seida ordered him to be flogged; Michael, however, endured the punishment for hours on end. Then she sent him, in shackles, to the "emperor," and in a note accused "the impudent monk" of an offensive assault, for which he was beheaded.⁸²

Another version of the "new Joseph" story presents the woman not as a mighty queen or the *patrikios*' spouse but as an ordinary seductress. Thus the Samaritans sent a woman to tempt St. James and paid her twenty gold coins. James let her in, kindled the hearth, and tried to warm her with his hands. The woman, enticing the saint, asked him to stroke her breast (lit., heart), but to avoid temptation James put his left hand into the fire until his fingers burned down. Shaken by his steadfastness, the woman converted.⁸³ Another whore acted on her own. She heard about the blessed Martinianos and proclaimed that he would fall like the leaf from the tree if she wanted; if my beauty, said she, does not shatter him, he is really a marvel not only among men but even among the angels. In the ragged disguise of a poor woman, she knocked at his door and was let in, but the saint retreated to an inner chamber and locked the door behind. When in the morning Martinianos came out to see her off, he did not recognize his guest: the harlot had taken off her rags, adorned herself, and prepared for a siege on his chastity. She told him that she had heard about him and yearned to sate herself with his handsomeness; she asked him why he was burying "such a marmoreal youthfulness," and, referring to the Bible, called him to marriage. Martinianos retorted that he could not marry her since he was poor and unable to support a family. Do not worry, she replied, I have everything—a house, gold, silver, properties, and slaves. The saint, continues the hagiographer, began to be inflamed with desire, and he even looked out at the road, which was deserted at that hour. But God did not allow him to perish: Martinianos collected some brushwood, made a fire, and entered the flame struggling against himself; this fire, comments hagiographer, typified the archetypal eternal flame. The whore was stricken; she realized her wrongdoing, threw her ornaments into the fire, put on her ragged dress, and fell to the feet of the saint asking to be forgiven.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ BHG 100, pp. 344.11–345.9; BHG 99, p. 361.11–14.

⁸¹ BHG 2372–73, ed. F. Halkin, "Histoire édifiante de Philothée injustement accusé par une femme et miraculeusement sauvé," *JOB* 37 (1987), p. 34.82–91.

⁸² BHG 1744, pp. 17–28.

⁸³ BHG 770, pp. 279–81.

⁸⁴ BHG 1177, ed. P. Rabbow, pp. 278–82.

St. James and St. Martinianos found themselves on the verge of a fall and needed the purifying force of fire to overcome temptation. Later saints seem to have mortified their flesh to such an extent that they simply ignored attempts to seduce them. Elias Spileotes, with a number of monks, had to flee to Patras, where one of the local residents invited him for dinner. Seeing his clean, bright face, the wife of the host, "the new Egyptian lady," "with her heart pierced by the sting of licentiousness," not only ogled Elias with her intemperate eyes but even stretched out her foot and shamelessly rubbed his leg. Her courtship remained in vain; "the new Joseph" was not shaken in his heart, nor did he cherish sweet desire but, as he later told his disciples, his flesh did not even feel her touch.⁸⁵ In more detail a scene of seduction is depicted in the *Vita* of Elias the Younger. His master's spouse, enflamed with desire, besieged Elias with a myriad of tricks: she colored her face brightly as if anointing it with milk, dyed her cheeks red, painted her eyes so that they sparkled, let her hair fall and her shirt trail along; she placed her hands on his bosom, dragged off his clothes, stripped his breast and arms, and tried to caress his face with hers—but "the new Joseph" remained immovable like an impregnable wall or a stony rock.⁸⁶ A similar story is in Prodhomos' *Vita* of Meletios of Myopolis. A noblewoman from Thebes, proud of her wealth and beauty, licentious and insolent, came to Meletios and attempted to incite him by improper movements and obscene words. The saint paid no attention and recommended that she communicate with those who wore long golden hair.⁸⁷

Nicholas the Soldier, when he stayed in an inn, was tempted by the owner's daughter. She came to his room at night and called him to "an impure intercourse"; she was mad from eros, but Nicholas quietly explained to her that she was a victim of demons who were forcing her to lose her virginity and become a shameful laughing stock.⁸⁸ The chaste man should be polite and careful not to offend his seductress, as we can learn from an erotic story told by Prodhomos. Once the monks of St. Meletios of Myopolis went to a nearby village to buy wine; the merchant(?) was a good man, but his wife was a real harlot. She wanted to seduce one of the monks, so she behaved like a lewd woman. She

took off his shoes and offered him slippers, washed his feet and dried them, looked gentle, let warm tears run, and addressed him with the following words: "Why do you need the desert, why do you need poverty? These boorish sandals do not fit you, this rough dress does not suit your flesh. You could adorn a city and be the first among consuls." She waylaid him, she waged a hand-to-hand fight against his invincible soul; she accompanied the monk to the vineyard and there attacked him in her "naked passion," but he drove her away using crude words (and not the cleansing fire, as St. James and St. Martinianos). When he came back to the monastery Meletios already knew about his affair, but he did not praise his temperance. Without mentioning the monk's courageous resistance in the house and the vineyard, Meletios berated him for his swearing and quoted Matt. 23:24: why being meticulous in straining a gnat, did he swallow a big camel?⁸⁹ Did Meletios mean that swearing was a vice worse than fornication?

Saints could be helpful in preventing young monks from intercourse. A woman wanted to arouse a stylite's pupil to the sexual act; the lad was slow in making a decision, but Gregory of Dekapolis appeared on the spot and with his staff chased the evil woman away.⁹⁰

The ultimate temptation scene occurs in the *Vita* of Andrew the Fool: a whore dragged him into a brothel where prostitutes surrounded him and invited him to fornication. The description is naturalistic: they fondled his secret parts, kissed him, and urged him to sate his soul and his desire. But they were unable to excite Andrew and cried out hopelessly: "He is dead or [a piece of] insensible wood or immovable stone."⁹¹

The situation could be reversed, with the woman becoming the object of courting. As in the "new Joseph" situation, two types of attack occur: entreating and forcing. In a short tale, Moschos describes a monk's attempts to seduce a peasant's daughter; she managed to persuade him gently that the fornication would ruin his soul and she would have no recourse but to commit suicide after having slept with him.⁹² Another story by Moschos is about a young virgin who lived in her own house. A man inflamed by love for her (it was certainly a satanic passion incited by the Devil) constantly loitered in front of her house, so that she

⁸⁵ BHG 581, col. 857AB.

⁸⁶ BHG 580, ed. G. R. Taibbi, *Vita di sant'Elia il Giovane* (Palermo, 1962), p. 16.192–217.

⁸⁷ BHG 1248, ed. V. Vasil'evskij, p. 45.14–28.

⁸⁸ BHG 2311, ed. L. Clugnet, *ROC* 7 (1902), pp. 323 f.

⁸⁹ BHG 1248, pp. 57–59.

⁹⁰ BHG 711, p. 67.1–9.

⁹¹ BHG 117, cols. 652D–653A.

⁹² PG 87, 2892AC.

could not even go out to pray in a chapel. The virgin sent her maid to invite him in, received him sitting at her loom, and asked him why he pursued her. I love you, he answered. When I see you I am all aflame. What do you like in me that makes you adore me so passionately, she inquired. Your eyes, he answered sincerely, they have deceived me. She immediately took the weaver's shuttle and gouged out both eyes,⁹³ thus surpassing the ordeal of St. James and St. Martinianos. The poor lover, in compunction and regret, took the monastic habit.

Women are often presented as victims of the sexual drive of the powerful. Many works dealing with the period of the anti-Christian persecutions portray the sufferings of beautiful Christian virgins who attracted the attention of the womanizer-judge. One example is found in the *Historia Lausiaca* by Palladios. A typical Roman judge tried to persuade a typical Christian girl to worship emperors and idols. She refused, and up to this point the story follows the typical pattern. Then Palladios introduced, instead of the traditional motive for torture, a sexually tinged episode: the judge placed the girl in a brothel, and instantly the patrons of the establishment began to haunt this "workshop of destruction," but the girl managed to gain some delay hiding in a secret, foul-smelling room. Then a young "magistrianus" came to her aid; he entered the room and gave her his clothes so that she could flee. The next day the trickery became public, and the "magistrianus" was thrown to the beasts.⁹⁴ The situation described seems perverse to our taste: when love appears, it is a kind of persecution and vengeance; when we expect true love, it is replaced by Christian compassion and self-sacrifice completely devoid of sexual attraction.

Another version of the same theme replaces the pagan judge with a barbarian suitor. Thus the *Vita* of Peter of Argos relates how the Cretan Arabs took many captives and were ready to give them up for ransom, except for a woman who was young and beautiful; they wanted to deliver this woman to their phylarch. The agreement was not reached, the Cretans interrupted negotiations, and sailed away.⁹⁵ The intervention of St. Peter destroyed their plans.

Instead of force, a seducer could employ a simpler, more down-to-earth tool—deceit. The classic example of a forsaken and deceived girl is in the

tale of the daughter of Haplorrabdes included in the epic of Digenis Akritas. A parallel story is to be found in the *Vita* of Lazarus Galesiotes who met a girl moaning and lamenting because she had been swindled and led away from her native land, and her deceiver robbed her and disappeared. I have analyzed the similarity between these two tales,⁹⁶ and see no reason to return to this topic: unlike Digenis, Lazarus did not succumb to the temptation of the situation and remained honest in his role of caretaker of a forsaken girl.

MAGIC AND DEMONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CHASTITY

Libertines suffering from unrequited love and unable to resort to force or deceit looked to magic for help. The *Historia Lausiaca* contains a story about an Egyptian infatuated with a free married woman who rejected his courting. The man went to a sorcerer who made the woman φορβάς. The word means "mare" but also has the connotation "prostitute." The hagiographer depicts how the man puts a halter on the woman of his heart and leads her "like a horse" to the desert.⁹⁷ When a girl from a noble Cappadocian family settled in the convent of Irene of Chrysobalanton, her former suitor found a magician, a servant of Satan, who promised to satisfy the infatuated man's desire. Soon the girl was attacked by a frantic lust for her former suitor, so that she threatened to commit suicide unless she was allowed to see him. None of the prayers of Irene and the other nuns could help her, and the Mother of God had to arrange a magic operation to quell the magic forces created by the sorcerer. She appeared in a vision to Irene and then sent the martyr Anastasia and Basil the Great who came flying through the air and let down a package weighing about three pounds; it contained a variety of magic devices, including two lead puppets—one resembling the suitor, the other the lovesick girl—embracing each other. These instruments of sorcery (γοιτεύματα) were committed to the flames, and immediately the woman was liberated from her invisible ties and restored to soundness of mind.⁹⁸

Gregory, the author of the *Vita* of Basil the Younger, recalls his encounter with a witch. She

⁹³ PG 87, 2912D–2913B.

⁹⁴ Ed. C. Butler (see above, note 24), pp. 160–62.

⁹⁵ BHG 1504, ed. Ch. Papaoikonomou, p. 67.23–32.

⁹⁶ A. Kazhdan, "Hagiographical Notes," *Byzantion* 54 (1984), 182–84.

⁹⁷ Ed. Butler (see above, note 24), pp. 44.28–45.13.

⁹⁸ *Vita* of Irene of Chrysobalanton, BHG 952, ed. J. O. Rosenquist, *The Life of St. Irene, Abbess of Chrysobalanton* (Uppsala, 1986), pp. 52–64.

was united “by legitimate marriage” with the *mis-thios* Alexander but was so licentious that she slept with all the men from the neighboring *proasteia*. Daughter of a witch, she used magic instruments (*μαγικά*) to achieve her impure aims. When she wanted to entrap Gregory, she began to apply, as Gregory sees it, both traditional feminine means and sorcery: by day she strutted before him, and at night she sent him seductive visions. The hagiographer asserts, however, that he managed to chase her away.⁹⁹

Sorcerers and witches could induce sexual desire in chaste persons. Even more dangerous for monks, nuns, and clergymen was the Fiend himself or a special demon of fornication. Moschos, for instance, narrates a story of a recluse on the Mount of Olives against whom the demon of fornication waged war; finally, the monk gave up and called the demon, who immediately appeared and demanded that the monk cease venerating the image of the Virgin.¹⁰⁰ The cult of the Virgin and chastity are bound together in this story, as they are in the *Vita* of Irene of Chrysobalanton.

The *Historia Lausiaca* also mentions the demon of fornication, and tells the story of the deacon Evagrius, who was entrapped by the “idol of desire for women.”¹⁰¹ Theodora of Alexandria was an honest woman living in legitimate marriage, but the Evil One selected a rich man, incited longing for Theodora in him, and with the aid of a witch helped him achieve his goal. Ashamed and upset, Theodora confessed her sin in a convent and afterward, having put on male dress, entered a monastery outside Alexandria.¹⁰² In the *Vita* of Lazarus Galesiotes, there is a tale about a girl in Rome, a daughter of rich parents, who was possessed by the demon; she demanded to be brought to the monk Paphnoutios. Three times she tried to enter his cell and retreated, but finally the parents left her alone with the monk. Then the demon stopped torturing the girl and began to confuse Paphnoutios’ mind, persuading him to have intercourse with the girl. Paphnoutios yielded, perpetrated the sinful act, and later, in despair, ran to Asia and settled in a cave. This erotic affair is omitted in the later revision of the *Vita* produced by Gregory of Cyprus, who only mentions the name of Paphnoutios.¹⁰³

The spirit of fornication battled with St. Ioanni-

kios. The holy man cured a girl who, while walking with her mother, was suddenly assaulted by the *πνεῦμα τῆς πορνείας*, and, unable to bear “the flame of the demon,” began shouting impudent words. The hagiographer tells another story about the spirit of fornication who possessed a woman so that she lost her reason, tore up her dress, let her hair fall loose, and lived like a beast, even feeding on her own flesh.¹⁰⁴ Peter, the hagiographer of St. Ioannikios, walks on a tightrope here, since nakedness and loose hair could appear in hagiographical writings in a different context, as a symbol of the pious hermit living for decades in the desert. As frequently happens in Byzantine literature, the image has an ambiguous meaning. Even though we do not hear about any licentious behavior of the possessed woman, Peter emphasized several times that Ioannikios rescued her “from the hefty chain of fornication,” ministered to her “spiritual shrine” troubled by the spirit of fornication, imitated Christ who had saved the suffering harlot. When Symeon Metaphrastes revised this story, he omitted the sexual element, leaving only demoniac possession.¹⁰⁵

A story about the Devil’s malice is included in the *Vita* of Lazarus Galesiotes. A man from the theme of Anatolikon was taken captive and led away to a barbarian land. He entreated God to liberate him from captivity, vowing that he would never return to his house but would put on the monastic habit and go to the Holy Land. His supplication was heard, and the man was released from captivity. But, neglecting his vow, he headed home, and in a small village a poor woman accommodated him in her hut. The Devil persuaded the man to have intercourse with his hostess, but after he had sated his desire, the former captive learned that he had slept with his own daughter.¹⁰⁶

Sexual visions and dreams were powerful instruments in the Devil’s hands.¹⁰⁷ The demon of fornication attacked Epiphanius, the chaste friend of Andrew the Fool; the young man suffered from these assaults when in his dreams he saw lewd women and sinfully slept with them.¹⁰⁸ St. Nilus of Rossano, while staying in Rome, saw a German woman tall and bulky; the demons who produced

¹⁰⁴ *BHG* 936, cols. 410C, 398C–399A.

¹⁰⁵ *BHG* 936, col. 399BC; *BHG* 937, col. 60BC.

¹⁰⁶ *BHG* 979, col. 529BD.

¹⁰⁷ For brief notes on erotic dreams in Byzantine literature, see G. Dagron, “Rêver de Dieu et parler de soi,” *I sogni nel medioevo*, ed. T. Gregory (Rome, 1985), 45 f.

¹⁰⁸ *BHG* 117, col. 792BC; see also col. 841B.

⁹⁹ *BHG* 264b, pp. 320 f.

¹⁰⁰ PG 87, 2900BC.

¹⁰¹ Ed. Butler (see above, note 24), pp. 121.3, 117.8–16.

¹⁰² *BHG* 1727–30.

¹⁰³ *BHG* 979, col. 521AC; *BHG* 980, col. 597E.

this image insistently displayed it to the saint during his mental exercises.¹⁰⁹ St. Antony the Younger was also haunted by “demoniac fantasies.” Once as he was sitting naked near his cell he saw a beautiful woman, with loose hair (λυσίθριξ appears in Liddell-Scott with a reference only to the Byzantine *Geoponika*), who shamefully headed toward him; the saint retreated to his cell. Before he became a hermit, Antony was much tortured by sexual yearning—the trail of the flesh, as his hagiographer says; so he decided to enter legitimate marital union lest he be caught by “the nets of fornication” and become the object of ridicule.¹¹⁰ Moschos makes abba Elias confess to erotic visions incited by the Devil; unable to resist he ran out of his cell, paying no attention to the stone-scorching heat, to satisfy his yearning. He was burning with desire, but suddenly had a vision of another kind: he saw a deep precipice and corpses reeling out of it. In panic he fell on the ground.¹¹¹

Saints could fight against such visions. Once in his wanderings, St. Nilus of Rossano met a young nun who threw herself down in a narrow passage so that the holy man could not avoid touching her. An innocuous incident? No, Nilus recognized Satan’s trick, hit her with his staff, and quickly passed by. Despite his success, Nilus was frightened by this affair and decided not to allow his brethren to journey alone, nor would he walk by himself.¹¹² Laymen, however, could easily be deceived by demoniac visions. A story in the *Vita* of Irene of Chrysobalanton illustrates this idea. Nicholas was a *misthios* in Irene’s convent. He wanted to sleep with a nun of the convent, and finally, at night, the Devil made him believe that he had achieved his goal; he dreamt that he had passed through the gateway and entered the cell of the coveted woman. But instead of this affair he had a stroke, from which eventually Irene cured him.¹¹³

The *Vita* of Andrew the Fool teems with sexual visions. A woman saw in her dream an old Ethiopian (a symbol of the Devil), who started to embrace and kiss her as if he were joking, and then he asked her to sleep with him. She saw a dog (another devilish symbol); he was big and black, and kissed her mouth-to-mouth, as a man. She also saw herself standing in the Hippodrome and embracing the statues, driven to them by a desire for for-

nication; finally came a vision of herself and a dog gobbling a frog, a snake, and even worse things¹¹⁴—objects that were probably considered sexual stimulants.

The Byzantines seem to have been surrounded by sexual temptation, and even marriage was not a guarantee against the seductions that attacked men and women in reality and in devil-inspired dreams. Priests, monks, and nuns suffered from it no less than secular society. Some saints hoped to escape the sin by fleeing. Thus St. Martinianos expressed a clear desire to live in a place to which no woman had access.¹¹⁵ A young nun in Jerusalem was loved by a youth (Moschos naturally describes his feeling as “satanic eros”). The nun did not wish to become the cause of the young man’s moral ruin, so she took a small basket of soaked pulse and fled to the desert; a miracle confirms that she behaved properly: the amount of the pulse in her basket did not diminish and she was able to survive on this food.¹¹⁶ Some pious men were able to develop such a level of sanctity that they grew insensible to sexual yearning and, moreover, shared this capacity with their disciples. A certain Niketas of Macedonia suffered from “satanic eros,” but St. Meletios cured him so effectively that not only was he above any temptation but his genitalia became completely cool and he remained impotent.¹¹⁷ When St. Luke the Younger and his pupil Pankratios ran away from a hostile invasion, they took shelter in a cave; two women joined them and were admitted by Luke, since it was wintertime. Because of the cold he put the women between himself and Pankratios, but he treated them as a mother treats her child. He remained, says the hagiographer, like a stone or a wooden log, and not even a single satanic thought flashed through his mind.¹¹⁸

CONCLUSION

We have gone through dozens of erotic tales related by hagiographers, and now we must try to draw conclusions from these dispersed and evidently non-comprehensive episodes. The first and simplest statement is that the Byzantines acknowledged the existence and the strength of sexual desire: the body and its yearning was a presumption from which hagiographers would start. Frequently

¹⁰⁹ *BHG* 1370, ed. *Acta SS* Sept. VII, col. 274D.

¹¹⁰ *BHG* 142, pp. 207.24–32, 200.17–25.

¹¹¹ PG 87, 2865CD.

¹¹² *BHG* 1370, ed. *Acta SS* Sept. VII, cols. 299C–300D.

¹¹³ *BHG* 952, ed. Rosenquist (see above, note 98), pp.66–74.

¹¹⁴ *BHG* 117, col. 780AC.

¹¹⁵ *BHG* 1177, ed. P. Rabbow, p. 284.34–35.

¹¹⁶ PG 87, 3049AD.

¹¹⁷ *Vita* of Meletios of Myopolis, *BHG* 1248, ed. V. Vasil’evskij, p. 52.19–26.

¹¹⁸ *BHG* 994; PG 111, 468BC.

sexual desire was interpreted as a result of devilish intervention, of satanic eros, of demoniac frenzy; sometimes such an explicit interpretation is lacking and we may consider it the depravity of human nature. The difference is not so great, since the depravity of human nature could itself be explained by the role of Satan. Touching on this point, however, we face a major theological problem, that of free will, and this is not the place to discuss it.

Sexual desire is the sin of the body, and not of the soul, and probably because of this some fornicators are granted dispensation: first of all, the sexual liberty of a slave maid was not sinful; then a sincere repentance would save even a professional prostitute; a single good act opened the kingdom of heaven for a libertine; finally, God's incomprehensible will could transform a harlot into an instrument of miracle-working.

Of course, what hagiographers recommended was not indulgence in fornication but avoidance of it. Legitimate marriage was the natural choice. Marriage was a blessed union, and we probably can observe gradually growing respect toward it. The earlier concept that the ideal marriage is the one without consummation was contrasted with the ideal of the "middle way" (in the style of Cyril Phileotes) or even of a normal family propagated by Eustathios of Thessalonike.

Monasticism was by definition an escape from sexual activity, though not from sexual desire: not every monk or hermit was above his flesh, and while some of them succumbed to temptation, others would turn to physical ordeals (especially self-torture by fire) not only to quench their passion but to confound their seducers—a theme that found its classical expression in Leo Tolstoj's "Otec Sergej." Some perfect saints, however, reached such sexual aloofness that they became insensible to the charms of the other sex—like logs or rocks, to use hagiographical similes.

Thus sexuality besmears the men and women affected; in hagiography it is never coupled with love. Love is placed on a different level—as Christian devotion or Christian philanthropy. Marriage is concluded not by interested parties but by their parents. It is seen as necessary for procreation, for the very existence of humankind; it prescribes marital fidelity and requires self-sacrifice when the material well-being of the family is threatened. But never was hagiographical marriage based on the joys of the flesh, on sexual love. The topic of human love was reintroduced in Greek literature in the eleventh century, in Psellos, and burgeoned in twelfth-century erotic romances.

Dumbarton Oaks